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COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF
RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES
UNDER ARTICLE 9 OF THE CONVENTION

Fifth periodic reports of States parties due in 1998

Addendum

Mauritania*

[3 August 1998]

1. Like many other African and developing countries, Mauritania, which recovered its sovereignty after more than half a century of colonization, entered a period of emergency under civilian one-party rule and, later, under a military regime.

2. This period was marked by a great number of restrictions and impediments to the exercise of public freedoms.

3. Since the promulgation of the Constitution of 20 July 1991, which re-established fundamental freedoms and instituted multi-party democracy, the public authorities have stepped up efforts to strengthen the framework for the enjoyment of human rights by revising or adjusting various organic laws and

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* This document contains the initial report and the second, third, fourth and fifth periodic reports of Mauritania due in 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996 and 1998, respectively.

codes. The process of normalization was also reflected in the emergence of several national human rights structures, culminating in the establishment in 1998 of the office of the Commissioner for human rights, poverty alleviation and social integration.

4. The implementation of all these measures has led to some delay in Mauritania's submission of the initial report required under article 9, paragraph 1, of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. However, Mauritania remains fully committed to taking all necessary measures with a view to the implementation of the Convention's provisions.

5. This report, submitted with a view to the establishment of a fruitful dialogue with the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, will try to inform the Committee of the legislative, administrative, judicial and other steps taken by Mauritania in order to implement the provisions of the Convention.

6. The report combines in a single document the initial report and the second, third, fourth and fifth periodic reports due, respectively, in 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996 and 1998. It is composed of four main parts:

I. General

II. Administrative and political structures

III. Constitutional guarantees and general legal framework for the protection of human rights

IV. Information on the substantive articles of the Convention (arts. 2 to 7).

I. GENERAL

A. Geographical data

7. The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is located between 15 and 27 degrees latitude North and 16 and 19 degrees longitude West and covers an area of 1,030,700 square kilometres.

8. It borders on Western Sahara to the north-west, Algeria to the north, Mali to the east, Mali and Senegal to the south and the Atlantic Ocean to the west.

9. In the centre and north of the country, the landscape is mountainous, with massifs, such as Adrar and Tagant, which are 400 to 800 m high. In the south lies the valley of the Sénégal River, known here as Chemama. The rest of the country consists mainly of sand-dune formations.

10. Mauritania is divided into four climatic areas, as follows:

(a) The pre-Sahelian area, or Sénégal River area, with annual rainfall levels reaching 300 to 400 mm, where crops suitable for low water levels can be grown;

(b) The Sahelian area, with a dry climate (annual rainfall between 100 and 300 mm);

(c) The very large Saharan area in the north, with mostly irregular rainfall of less than 100 mm a year and a great scarcity of water sources outside the few oases, where sizeable inhabited areas have grown up as a result of the planting of large palm groves;

(d) The coastal area, influenced by the Atlantic Ocean.

11. Mauritania was severely affected by the 1972-1984 drought, which caused major population movements and considerably reduced the country's agricultural and stock-breeding potential, leading to a deterioration in the living standards of the rural population. Despite improved rainfall figures in the past few years, the social and economic situation of this population group is still fragile.

B. Population and social development

12. The population of Mauritania was estimated to be 2,350,000 in 1996. Insofar as population structure is concerned, the Mauritanian people consists of an Arab majority, composed of Blacks and Whites, and non-Arabic-speaking Pular, Soninké and Wolof.

13. These population groups have lived together in harmony, unity and solidarity for centuries, forging a united and fraternal nation both before and during the colonization era and within the new modern State. These qualities are the envy of many other countries of comparable composition and/or size which became independent at approximately the same time.

14. As far as religious structure is concerned, the Mauritanian people is wholly Muslim. The Islam practised by the people has always been a moderate Sunnite Islam, of the Malekite rite having no sectarian or dogmatic features. It is a religion of tolerance which cultivates solidarity, promotes unity, abhors violence and hatred and combats arbitrariness and oppression. It has been the true unifying agent of Mauritanian national identity.

15. The annual population growth rate is 2.9 per cent; life expectancy at birth is 51.3 years and the fertility rate is 6.32 per cent.

16. The worsening of climatic conditions over the past 20 years as a result of drought has led to a massive population exodus to the towns that has created a serious problem of urbanization. The proportion of rural nomads in the population as a whole was 72 per cent in 1970; it fell to 32.9 per cent in 1977 and to 11.4 per cent in 1988.

17. In terms of age groups, half the population is under 18 years of age.

18. The Government adopted the Declaration on Population Policy, whose ultimate goal is the sustainable improvement of the population's living conditions. This policy forms part and parcel of a set of ambitious programmes to combat poverty, promote literacy and bring about food security, land reform and the advancement of women.

1. Poverty alleviation

19. In 1994, the Government adopted an anti-poverty strategy based on a three-pronged approach consisting in the promotion of direct growth rooted firmly within the economic sphere of the poor, the improvement of their access to social services and the adoption of participatory grass-roots development systems.

20. An anti-poverty programme for the years 1998-2000 has been adopted in the framework of the implementation of this strategy. The programme's total cost of 44 billion ouguiya is significant in relation to the size of Mauritania's population.

21. The programme has the following eight subprogrammes:

(a) Strengthening of micro-enterprises;

(b) Promotion of associative economic enterprises (cooperatives, tontines);

(c) Development of labour-intensive activities;

(d) Micro-financing (widespread introduction of a system of popular savings and loan associations);

(e) Advancement of women;

(f) Improvement of social services;

(g) Establishment of development associations;

(h) Coordination, steering and statistical follow-up.

22. The poverty figures which served as the basis for this strategy and for the anti-poverty and grass-roots development framework programme show that the poverty level has declined slightly over the past six years. The percentage of poor people within the population as a whole fell from 56.6 per cent in 1990 to 50.5 per cent in 1996. This improvement was achieved as a result of literacy campaigns, increases in the gross percentage of children in full-time education (87.1 per cent in 1996), increased health care coverage (75 per cent in 1994), improvements in drinking water supply through the implementation of hydraulic development programmes (2,400 new water sources) and the widespread introduction of micro-credit practices, as well as of developments in types of dwellings.

23. The decline in the poverty level has not, however, taken place evenly throughout the whole national territory. Because of low productivity and the

precariousness of incomes, poverty is concentrated in rural areas. In towns, poverty is mainly the result of unemployment and underemployment.

2. Literacy campaigns

24. In view of the adverse effects of illiteracy on the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, the continued existence of prejudice and backwardness and economic and social development as a whole, the authorities have made action to combat illiteracy a national priority ever since 20 January 1985, when the Head of State, H.E. Maaouiya Ould Sidi Ahmed Taya, made the following appeal in his speech at Néma:

> "There is an extremely sensitive problem which calls for a rapid solution and whose devastating effects are as alarming as those of desertification ... . I am speaking about illiteracy, which I enjoin you to combat with all your strength until it is fully eradicated ... . I also invite you to make 1985 our national Year of Literacy, with the goal of definitively eliminating the scourge of illiteracy from our country by the 1990s."

25. Accordingly, a State secretariat for the promotion of literacy and basic education was set up in 1986 to implement the national policy on the eradication of illiteracy and on adult education. Its activities are as follows:

(a) Promoting awareness;

(b) Establishing curricula and preparing textbooks;

(c) Organizing and promoting all forms of activity within its area of competence;

(d) Developing and restructuring the teaching dispensed in the Mahdras (traditional universities); in particular through the introduction of vocational training programmes.

26. As a result of intensive literacy campaigns periodically conducted by the State secretariat for the promotion of literacy and basic education and the establishment of adult literacy classes and centres, more than 200,000 adults were taught how to read and write between 1984 and 1997. The adult illiteracy rate was estimated at 50.2 per cent in 1995 as against 72 per cent in 1985.

3. Food security

27. The prolonged drought which affected Mauritania from the 1970s onwards produced a structural food shortage and social imbalances that called for the adoption of a food security strategy with a sustained positive impact on vulnerable population groups and adequate management and coordination structures. The Office of the Food Security Commissioner (CSA) was therefore established in 1982 to ensure that assistance was provided free of charge, on an emergency basis, for the supply of essential foodstuffs to the poorest sectors of the population, for help to local communities in creating basic

social and economic infrastructures through the "Food for Work" programme, for promoting the national production of cereals by buying up surpluses and for setting up and managing security stocks.

28. In the period between 1992 and 1996, the CSA executed hundreds of special emergency and anti-poverty programmes and over 1,000 micro-projects, such as building dams and dykes, developing market gardening and grazing areas, building low income housing, opening up tracks, and reafforestation.

29. In addition to the humanitarian impact of its activities, the CSA has always been a valuable tool for the implementation of Government plans designed to enable the poorest sectors of society to take charge of their own lives and to bring about sustainable improvements in their living standards.

30. The CSA is currently in process of carrying out an ambitious restructuring programme designed to make it even better equipped for the work it is doing. In particular, greater attention will be devoted to targeting beneficiaries, improving management procedures and ensuring greater precision in the execution of programmes.

31. Its activities will, accordingly, include the following:

(a) Achieving food security by organizing and supervising the free distribution of food in cases of serious shortage, marketing food aid intended for sale, establishing and operating a centralized system of information on cereal markets, and setting up and managing security stocks;

(b) Developing social infrastructures (dispensaries, schools), economic infrastructures (dams, dykes, retaining walls, wells, etc.), and activities designed to protect and/or improve the environment (reafforestation, sand-dune fixation, etc.);

(c) Promoting labour-intensive activities;

(d) Income-generating micro-projects (village shops, cereal banks, market gardens, etc.);

(e) Carrying out integrated projects (integrated village-scale, departmental and regional development programmes, etc.);

(f) Literacy, technical training and teacher-training programmes;

(g) Institutional support to local and regional authorities (government services and civil society);

(h) Promoting micro-enterprises in towns;

(i) Promoting alternative forms of financing both in the countryside and in towns, particularly by encouraging the creation of decentralized and self-managed savings and loan associations and cereal banks;

(j) Being receptive to the views of all segments of the population and involving them in designing projects corresponding to their real needs.

4. State land and agrarian reform

32. Land reform legislation includes Order No. 83 127 of 5 June 1983 on the reorganization of private and State land ownership and Decree No. 84 009 of 19 January 1984 implementing the said order.

33. The main purpose of this reform was to abolish customary rights, award land to previously landless peasants and disadvantaged persons and create the conditions necessary for the achievement of food self-sufficiency.

34. In particular, Order No. 83 127 provided as follows:

> "Article 1. The land belongs to the nation and every Mauritanian, without discrimination of any kind, may, in complying with the law, become the owner of a part thereof.
>
> Article 2. The State recognizes and guarantees private land ownership, which must, in conformity with the Shari'a, contribute to the country's economic and social development.
>
> Article 3. The traditional land tenure system shall be abolished.
>
> Article 4. Any property right which is not directly connected to a natural or legal person and does not derive from legally protected development shall be null and void.
>
> Article 6. ... Individual ownership shall be lawful.
>
> ...
>
> Article 9. 'Dead' lands shall be the property of the State. Land that has never been developed or whose development has left no visible trace shall be considered 'dead' land ...
>
> ...
>
> Article 11. Vacant and ownerless land shall be the property of the State in accordance with the conditions laid down by the Shari'a."

35. Article 21 of the implementing Decree authorizes communities which, for economic or technical reasons, wish to avoid dividing the land they work to do so by forming cooperatives. It thus guarantees their right to freedom of association, which is already provided for by law.

36. This reform took place within the context of a policy aimed at improving the status of the most disadvantaged social groups and eliminating the psychological, social, cultural and economic effects of involuntary servitude and of the share tenancy system which continued to exist despite the abolition of slavery.

37. Fifteen years ago, i.e. well before democratization, the Minister of the Interior stated as part of a campaign to explain this reform:

> "At the social level, the abolition of serfdom ... was still incomplete without a guarantee enabling all citizens to hold a genuine right to land ownership independent from community rights, which sometimes conceal ties of personal dependency."

The land reform has been supplemented and strengthened by the introduction in the past 10 years of a policy of agricultural development promotion designed to make the country self-sufficient in terms of food. This has taken the form of large-scale operations for the development of agricultural areas in the interest of cooperatives, carried out by the National Rural Development Company (SONADER); the establishment of the Agricultural Credit Bank (Crédit Agricole); and the award of plots of previously State-owned agricultural floodlands (M'Pourié plain, Gorgol pilot project area, etc.) to peasants in the regions concerned, the size of the plot being determined by the number of working family members.

38. This agricultural reform policy, as a result of which an arable land potential of about 140,000 hectares was developed in 1996 (including 45,000 hectares actually developed, as against only 7,700 hectares in 1986), is consolidated by major irrigation, development and hydraulic power works carried out by the Organization for the Development of the Sénégal River (OMVS), whose members are Mali, Senegal and Mauritania. The number of dams and dykes constructed is estimated at more than 500 in 1996.

5. Advancement of women

39. The sociology of Mauritania's traditional society gives women an advantageous status and makes respect for the dignity of women a point of honour which the community takes care not to transgress.

40. As a party to the Convention, Mauritania is committed to the elimination of restrictions which impede the emancipation of all social categories without any discrimination. In order to live up to this commitment, Mauritania has in recent years undertaken a number of steps aimed specifically at improving the living conditions of women while respecting their dignity.

41. The Government's policy on the promotion of the status of women involves creating favourable conditions for the education of women, their social advancement and their involvement in the exercise of political responsibilities. The State secretariat on the status of women, established in April 1992, reflects the political will of the Government to promote the rights of women and to ensure their contribution to political, economic and social activities.

42. As a result of this new orientation, Mauritanian women have entered the Government (three women ministers), Parliament and municipal councils and have been appointed to senior decision-making posts in the administration and in the private sector.

43. The Labour Code and the Public Service Act contain no discriminatory provisions in respect of the employment of women, who are entitled to three months' maternity leave on full pay and to one hour of rest a day while breastfeeding, as well as to maternity benefits.

44. Mauritanian women are particularly active within the associative movement. There are around 1,600 women's cooperatives and associations in fields as varied as family development, handicrafts, agriculture, the environment, trade and tourism.

45. Despite these advances, women in Mauritania still face a number of problems. For example, mention should be made of problems connected with poverty and the increase in the proportion of women heads of household (36 per cent); the high divorce rate (37.2 per cent) and the high maternal mortality rate (940 per 100,000 live births); illiteracy (78 per cent); the low profitability of women's work; insufficient information available to women about their social position and living conditions; and inadequate participation of women in decision-making and grass-roots development organizations.

46. In order to remedy this situation, the Government adopted the National Strategy for the Advancement of Women in 1995. The priority areas of this strategy are as follows:

(a) Improvement of women's employment;

(b) Increased participation by women and women's organizations in grass-roots development organizations;

(c) Adoption of a policy on the family and the child;

(d) Formulation of a strategy to promote information, education and communication;

(e) Institutional strengthening of the State secretariat on the status of women.

47. Within the framework of the implementation of this strategy, the Prime Minister addressed a circular to all ministries on 15 June 1997 inviting them to integrate women's work and responsibilities in their sectoral policies.

48. With a view to encouraging greater involvement on the part of civil society in the implementation of the national strategy for the advancement of women, a national training seminar on the rights of women was held at Nouakchott from 18 to 25 April 1998 on the occasion of the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A manual on the rights of Mauritanian women intended for popular readership and prepared in collaboration with the Mauritanian League of Human Rights was published during the seminar.

49. It should be noted that Mauritanian women celebrate the anniversary of the appeal in favour of the advancement of women launched at Néma in 1986 by H.E. Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya on 5 March and International Women's Day on 8 March of each year.

6. Social and economic indicators

50. As will be seen from the table below, the improvement in the main social and economic indicators reflects the advances in social development made in the past decade.

Indicators	1985	1995
Total population (in thousands)		2 277
Area (km^2)		1 030 700
Population density (inhab./km^2)		2.21
Per capita GDP (US$)		480
Access to health-care services (%)	30	63
Access to drinking water	36	63.7
Access to adequate sanitation (%)	5.0	61
Gross primary school enrolment rate (%)	46	87.1
Gross secondary school enrolment rate (%)		15
Boys		19
Girls		10
Higher education (students registered) (20-24 years) (%)		3.7
Literacy rate (%)		15
Over-15 age group (%)		50.8
GDP growth (%)		4.5
Life expectancy at birth, in years	45.1	51.4
Gross birth rate (0/00)		44.2
Gross death rate (0/00)		15.2
Infant mortality per 1 000 live births	131	106
Maternal mortality per 1 000 live births		904
Fertility index (number of children per woman)		6.3
Number of inhabitants per doctor	10 225	9 518
Urban population (%)		51.10
Rural population (%)		48.90
Annual growth rates (%): total population		2.9

Urban population	5.18
Active population (in thousands)	678 081
Persons in work (%)	29.7

II. ADMINISTRATIVE AND POLITICAL STRUCTURES

A. Administrative structures

51. Mauritania is divided into 13 wilayas (regions), including the Nouakchott Capital District. Each wilaya constitutes a decentralized administrative area. The wilayas are divided into moughataa (departments) and the moughataa into districts. The smallest administrative unit is the commune. There are 53 moughataa and 208 communes in the country.

52. Each wilaya is placed under the authority of a wali (governor) who represents the Executive; the moughataa are placed under a hakem (prefect) and the districts under a district chief.

53. Since 1989, the Government has been carrying out an administrative and institutional reform with a view to reorganizing the administration and adapting it to the needs of the population. A strategic choice was made in favour of decentralization, particularly because such a system is better equipped to solve the administrative, organizational and institutional problems which were previously handled by centralized systems.

54. Decentralization works particularly well in the fields of education, health and rural development because of their impact on the population's daily life.

B. Political structures

55. There have been three separate periods in Mauritania's modern political history:

(a) French colonial rule (1903-1960);

(b) Period of emergency rule under two separate regimes:

(i) The civilian regime marked by the exclusive one party-rule of the Mauritanian People's Party (1961-1978);

(ii) The military regime, with power concentrated in the hands of military committees (1978-1991);

(c) Since 1991, a multi-party democracy with a Constitution adopted following a popular referendum.

56. For practical reasons, this document will deal only with political structures set up since the establishment of the multi-party democracy.

57. The Constitution upholds the political, economic, cultural and social rights of all components of the Mauritanian people and reaffirms Mauritania's attachment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights. It guarantees the separation of powers, but also a proper balance between them.

1. The President of the Republic

58. The President of the Republic is the guarantor of the Constitution. He personifies the State and ensures the regular and continuous functioning of public power. He is elected for six years by direct universal suffrage. In order to avoid the undue influence of particular groups, all candidates for the office of President of the Republic must be sponsored by 50 municipal counsellors, it being understood that these counsellors must belong to at least 10 wilayas; no wilaya may provide more than one fifth of the sponsors.

2. The Government

59. Under the leadership of the Prime Minister, the Government oversees the implementation of the general policies of the State in accordance with guidelines issued by the President of the Republic. The members of the Government are appointed by the President of the Republic on the proposal of the Prime Minister.

3. Parliament

60. The Parliament is bicameral; it is composed of the Senate and the National Assembly. Deputies to the National Assembly are elected for five years by direct universal suffrage, while senators are elected for six years by indirect universal suffrage. Senators represent the country's territorial districts and Mauritanians residing abroad. One third of the Senate's membership is renewed every two years.

61. Legislation covers the fundamental rights and duties of persons, nationality, condition for the establishment of aliens, electoral regulations and territorial division into constituencies, regulation pertaining to ownership, trade union law, labour law, the general organization of the administration, the economic and social activities of the State, etc.

62. The National Assembly may dismiss the Government by a vote of no confidence or by the adoption of a motion of censure.

4. Judiciary

63. The judiciary is independent from the legislative and executive branches.

64. The President of the Republic is the guarantor of the independence of the judiciary. He is assisted therein by the Supreme Council of the Judiciary, over which he presides, and which is composed of:

(a) The Minister of Justice, Vice-President;

(b) The President of the Supreme Court, member;

(c) The most senior Vice-President of the Supreme Court, member;

(d) The Procurator-General attached to the Supreme Court, member;

(e) The Inspector-General of the judiciary and prisons administration, member;

(f) Three judges elected by their peers for a period of two years, members;

(g) A non-parliamentary representative of the Senate appointed for each judicial year by the President of the Senate, member;

(h) A non-parliamentary representative of the National Assembly appointed for each judicial year by the President of the National Assembly, member.

65. The law guarantees the judges' independence in handing down sentences and protects them against all forms of pressure that might influence them in the exercise of their duties (art. 15 of Organic Act No. 94-012 of 17 February 1994 on the status of the judiciary).

66. In Mauritania, justice is rendered by the following courts:

(a) Moughataa courts. These courts consist of one judge who presides over the proceedings and is assisted by two assessors.

(b) Wilaya courts. These courts are composed of two chambers - a mixed chamber and a civil and commercial chamber - as well as of one or more investigating units. The prosecution is represented in these courts by a Procurator of the Republic or by one of his deputies. Each of the two chambers is presided by a judge assisted by two magistrates with advisory voting rights.

(c) Labour courts. These are presided by a judge and also include assessors, as required by the Labour Code.

(d) Appeals Court. The Appeals Court consists of a mixed chamber which deals with appeals against decisions of wilaya courts and a civil chamber which deals with appeals against decisions of moughataa courts. The prosecution is represented by the Appeals Court Procurator or one of his deputies.

(e) Criminal courts. A criminal court whose jurisdiction and functioning are determined by the Code of Criminal Procedure is established at the seat of each chamber of the Appeals Court.

(f) Supreme Court. This court consists of a president, four vice-presidents, each of whom presides over a chamber, and several advisers. The chambers of the Supreme Court are as follows:

1. Administrative;

2. Civil and commercial;

3. Social;

4. Criminal.

In administrative matters, the Supreme Court has jurisdiction over appeals on grounds of abuse of power, the determination of the lawfulness of individual or statutory administrative acts, disputes relating to the situation of State officials or agents and Government entities and disputes relating to the public domain. In judicial matters, the Supreme Court rules on appeals on grounds of lack of jurisdiction or violation of the law against decisions handed down without right of appeal by the courts or the Council for the arbitration of collective labour disputes, as well as against decisions handed down with or without right of appeal by moughataa courts. The Supreme Court also rules on the following:

1. Review applications;

2. Applications for referral to another court;

3. Conflict-of-jurisdiction applications;

4. Appeals on grounds of a judge's judicial misconduct;

5. Actions brought against judges and certain categories of civil servants, as provided for in the Code of Criminal Procedure;

6. Conflicting decisions or judgements handed down without right of appeal by different courts in cases involving the same parties and the use of the same evidence.

The Supreme Court may also be invited to give its opinion on legislative and statutory drafts, as well as on problems of a legal nature raised by ministers in connection with the functioning of their departments.

67. Besides the three traditional powers (legislative, executive and judicial), the machinery of Mauritanian democratic institutions has been strengthened by the establishment of the following organs:

(a) Constitutional Council

68. The Constitutional Council oversees the regularity of elections, considers applications and rules on the constitutionality of laws.

69. The Constitutional Council has six members, two of whom are appointed for three years, two for six years and two for nine years.

70. The President of the Republic nominates one member of each of those three groups and appoints a President of the Council from among them. The

President of the National Assembly nominates one member for nine years and one for three years. The President of the Senate nominates one member for six years.

(b) High Court of Justice

71. The High Court of Justice is composed of members elected in equal numbers by the National Assembly and the Senate from among their members after each parliamentary election. It has jurisdiction to try cases of aggravated high treason by the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister or members of the Government.

(c) Court of Audit

72. The Court of Audit is the supreme institution for the audit of public finances. Its continuous and systematic verification, information and advisory activities contribute to the achievement of the following goals:

(a) Protection of public finances;

(b) Improvement of management methods and techniques;

(c) Rationalization of administrative procedures.

73. The Court of Audit is composed of the following members:

(a) The President of the Court;

(b) The presidents of the chambers;

(c) The presidents of the sections;

(d) Advisers;

(e) Auditors.

(d) Supreme Islamic Council

74. This institution is composed of five members nominated by the President of the Republic. It issues opinions on matters on which it is consulted by the President of the Republic.

(e) Economic and Social Council

75. The Economic and Social Council is requested by the President of the Republic to give its views on draft laws, orders and decrees of an economic and social nature and on bills of the same kind submitted to him. It may also be consulted by the President of the Republic on any economic or social matter of concern to the State.

(f) Mediator of the Republic

76. The Mediator of the Republic is an "independent authority"; he is appointed for an indefinite term of office. He receives applications from citizens relating to unsettled disputes in their relations with State administrations, territorial public authorities, public establishments and all other public service bodies.

77. He advises the President of the Republic on disputes between citizens and the administration.

78. He may also take part in improving the functioning of administrative bodies whose unsatisfactory operation he has found to be harmful to citizens by formulating proposals and suggestions designed to improve the functioning of the bodies concerned.

79. The Second World Congress of Ombudsmen and Mediators of French-Speaking Countries held at Nouakchott from 19 to 21 May 1998 on the general topic "Ombudsmen and Mediators: the independence of the institution in the service of democracy" paid tribute to this institution's recognized ability to play a regulatory and mediation role.

III. CONSTITUTIONAL GUARANTEES AND GENERAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

A. Constitutional guarantees

80. In its preamble, the Constitution of 20 July 1991 proclaims the attachment of the Mauritanian people to Islam and to the principles of democracy, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights, as well as by other international conventions to which Mauritania is a party.

81. The Constitution gives human rights constitutional status by providing that "liberty, equality and the dignity of man can be assured only in a society which respects the rule of law" and reaffirms the commitment of the Mauritanian people to guarantee the following rights and principles:

(a) The right to equality;

(b) Human rights and fundamental freedoms;

(c) The right to own property;

(d) Political and trade union freedoms;

(e) Economic and social rights; and

(f) Rights pertaining to the family, the basic unit of Islamic society.

82. Article 10 of the Constitution strengthens Mauritania's commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms by providing that the State shall guarantee public and individual freedoms to all its citizens and, in particular:

(a) Freedom of movement and residence in any part of the territory of the Republic;

(b) Freedom to enter and leave the national territory;

(c) Freedom of opinion and of thought;

(d) Freedom of expression;

(e) Freedom of assembly;

(f) Freedom to join the political or trade union organization of their choice;

(g) Freedom of trade and industry;

(h) Freedom of intellectual, artistic and scientific creative effort.

83. Article 13, paragraph 3, of the Constitution provides that the honour and privacy of the citizen and the inviolability of his person, his home and his correspondence are protected by law.

84. Under article 80 of the Constitution, international treaties or agreements ratified or approved in the regular manner take precedence, as soon as they are published, over national laws. They may then be invoked before the national courts and the administrative authorities.

85. Accordingly, any Mauritanian citizen who considers that his rights under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination have been infringed is entitled to invoke the Convention before the relevant courts and administrative authorities. In fact, the courts have never had to deal with a case of racial discrimination and no discriminatory practices on the ground of race have ever been reported by the independent press and civil society institutions.

B. Treaty guarantees

86. In addition to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Mauritania has ratified many other international human rights conventions and the protocols thereto.

87. They are the following:

(a) African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights;

(b) OAU Convention governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa;

(c) Convention on the Political Rights of Women;

(d) Convention on the Rights of the Child;

(e) International Convention against Apartheid in Sports;

(f) Convention relating to the Status of Refugees;

(g) Slavery Convention;

(h) Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices similar to Slavery;

(i) Protocol amending the Slavery Convention;

(j) Forced Labour Convention (Convention (No. 29) adopted on 28 June 1930 by the International Labour Organization);

(k) Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (Convention (No. 105) adopted on 25 June 1957 by the International Labour Organization);

(l) Convention for the suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others;

(m) International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid.

IV. INFORMATION ON THE SUBSTANTIVE PROVISIONS OF THE CONVENTION (arts. 2 to 7)

Article 2

88. Article 1 of the Constitution prohibits all forms of discrimination and proclaims that the Republic guarantees equality before the law to all citizens without distinction as to origin, race or social status.

89. The same article provides that "all particularist propaganda of a racial or ethnic nature shall be punished by law".

90. The Constitution also recognizes, in its articles 3 and 12, the right of all citizens without distinction to vote and to hold public office and employment. In article 15, it guarantees their right to own property and their right of inheritance.

91. It also guarantees that any alien who resides legally in the national territory will enjoy the protection of the law in respect of his person and property.

92. Article 306 of the Criminal Code provides that any person found guilty of profaning a place of worship is liable to three months to two years' imprisonment.

93. Articles 49 and 50 of the Code of Criminal Procedure increase the powers of judicial police officers and require them to take all necessary steps to ensure respect for freedom of worship.

94. Article 1 of the Labour Code provides, inter alia, that: "Anyone who, in return for a wage, undertakes to place his professional activity under the direction of another natural or legal person, public or private, regardless of his own sex or nationality, shall be considered a worker within the meaning of this law".

95. Article 15 of Civil Service Act No. 93-09 of 18 January 1993 states: "There shall be no discrimination between public officials based on opinion, sex or race". Article 105 of the Act prohibits any discrimination between contract workers employed by the State based on opinion, sex or race.

96. Order No. 91 028 (Organic Act on the Election of Deputies to the National Assembly), Order No. 91 029 (Organic Act on the Election of Senators) and Act No. 93 031 additional to certain provisions of Order No. 87 289 (art. 108) establishing communes provide that all Mauritanian citizens, both men and women, may be elected as deputies, senators and members of municipal councils if they meet the conditions of eligibility as to age, civil rights, etc.

97. Article 3 of the Constitution provides that suffrage "may be either direct or indirect, according to the provisions of the law. It shall always be universal, equal and secret".

98. Article 26 of the Constitution and article 1 of Order No. 91 028 on the Election of Deputies to the National Assembly lay down, respectively, the method of election of the President of the Republic and of deputies to the National Assembly, who are elected by direct universal suffrage.

Article 3

99. Mauritania has always condemned the policy of racial segregation and of apartheid which used to be practised in South Africa. It was in the forefront of all actions undertaken in the United Nations and by other competent bodies against apartheid and for the establishment of a democratic, non-racial South Africa.

100. Mauritania always adopted a policy of commitment to the imposition of compulsory sanctions against the racist regime then in power in South Africa and participated actively in international meetings to mobilize against apartheid; it was a signatory of the Declaration of the World Conference on Sanctions against Racist South Africa adopted in Paris on 20 June 1986.

101. Pursuant to the boycott measures decreed by the international community against the racist regime then in power in South Africa, the authorities prohibited Mauritanian citizens from travelling to that country. To that end, all Mauritanian travel documents were stamped "Travel to South Africa prohibited".

102. Furthermore, a resolution was adopted at Nouakchott on 17 February 1983 in the context of an international campaign of solidarity for the release of Nelson Mandela conducted with the active participation of senior civil servants, doctors, trade union officials and lawyers. The activities included a lecture given by Mr. Ibrahima Fall, organizer of the campaign, on the topic: "The struggle of the South African people against apartheid: historical aspects and development".

103. Recalling that apartheid as a political system constituted a challenge to mankind as a whole, the Nouakchott resolution denounced that odious system and recommended the establishment of a national anti-apartheid committee. During the campaign, Mauritania also recommended the establishment of a Pan-African committee for action to combat apartheid.

104. Mauritania always gave both moral and material support to the ANC and the PAC in their struggle against apartheid by collecting aid for those movements, issuing protective passports to their militants and giving them broadcasting time on the national radio. It also gave them valuable support through the Coordinating Committee for African Liberation, a standing body of the Organization of African Unity, of which it has been a member since 1972.

Article 4

105. The Constitution provides in its article 1 that "all particularist propaganda of a racial or ethnic nature shall be punished by law".

106. Article 6 of Order No. 91 024 on political parties provides that "no political party or group may identify itself with a race, an ethnic group, a region, a tribe, a sect or a brotherhood". Criminal penalties for breaching the provisions of this Order are six months to three years' imprisonment and a fine of between 80,000 and 400,000 ouguiya (art. 27).

107. The preamble of Order No. 91 023 establishing the framework for the exercise of freedom of the press defines the spirit by which the exercise of that freedom must be guided, particularly devotion to the national interest and to national unity and concord, and requires the public authorities, journalists and users to refrain from making use of the media for the purpose of arousing or encouraging a spirit of exclusion, discrimination or intolerance on a tribal, ethnic or regional basis or in respect of foreign individuals or groups.

108. The Order prohibits the publication of writings or other works of any kind which foment hatred or ethnic and/or regionalist prejudice and provides that breaches of these provisions shall be punished by a fine of between 10,000 and 100,000 ouguiya. A penalty of one to six months' imprisonment can be imposed in the event of the repetition of the offence.

Article 5

109. Article 10 of the Constitution guarantees all citizens public and individual freedoms, including, in particular, freedom of opinion, expression and assembly, as well as trade union freedoms and the freedom of association.

110. The right of access to public office or employment is guaranteed to all citizens under article 12 of the Constitution, which provides that "All citizens may accede to public office or employment without any conditions other than those determined by law".

111. Forced or compulsory labour is prohibited under article 3 of the Labour Code, which reads as follows: "Forced or compulsory labour shall be prohibited. The term 'forced or compulsory labour' means any work or service which is required from any individual under threat of punishment and which the said individual has not offered to perform of his own free will".

112. Freedom of association and of belonging to the political party of one's choice is likewise guaranteed for all citizens by virtue of article 3 of Order No. 91 024 of 25 July 1991 on political parties. Act No. 93 038 of 20 July 1993, which supplements certain provisions of the Labour Code, provides in its article 1 that "Persons exercising the same profession, similar trades or mutually related professions resulting in the production of specific goods or belonging to the same liberal professions may freely constitute a craft trade union".

113. Paragraph 2 of that article provides that "Any worker or employer, without distinction of any kind, may freely join a trade union of his choice within the framework of his profession or craft".

114. Article 3, paragraph 4, prohibits constraints on the exercise of trade union freedoms and provides that "Any constraint on trade union freedom shall be subject to penalties applicable in the case of constraints on freedom to work".

115. Article 14 of Civil Service Act No. 93-09 guarantees freedom of expression to all civil servants. Article 15 of the Act reads: "There shall be no discrimination between public officials based on opinion, sex or race".

116. Articles 17, 18 and 19 of the Act guarantee public officials freedom of opinion and political loyalty and recognize their right to establish trade unions or to belong to trade unions already in existence. Civil servants' trade unions can go to court and appeal to the relevant courts against statutory acts that infringe the collective interests of civil servants.

117. Article 21 of the Act recognizes the right of public officials to strike in defence of their collective interests.

118. Within this institutional framework, there are 20 regularly appearing independent newspapers, 24 political parties, dozens of non-governmental organizations and associations exercising their activities in perfect freedom and three centralized trade unions organizations for the protection of the material and moral interests of workers (Union of Mauritanian Workers, Free Confederation of Mauritanian Workers, General Confederation of Mauritanian Workers).

119. The expansion of institutions of civil society is accompanied by the establishment of ambitious programmes aimed at ensuring the population's

development and wellbeing in areas having a direct impact on changes of the structure of society, namely, health, social affairs and housing, as well as at improving equality of opportunity for all citizens.

A. Health

120. Health has always been integrated in all development plans and programmes. The 1998-2002 Master Plan on Health and Social Affairs sets out the Government's health and social affairs policies for that period.

121. The Plan aims at achieving the best possible state of health for the entire population by the year 2002 and especially for priority target groups, namely, women and children, nomads and people living in remote areas, the handicapped and individuals and families in an economically precarious situation, in a spirit of equity and solidarity.

122. Measures under the Master Plan are based on the strategy adopted by the International Conference on Primary Health Care, which was held at Alma Ata in 1978 and continues to form the basis of Mauritania's health policy. That policy is also supported by the Bamako initiative (1987) and other commitments undertaken in the field of health and related areas, particularly those deriving from the major conferences organized by the United Nations system in the 1990s.

123. The Government's priorities are as follows:

(a) To strengthen the provision of health care at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels in order to guarantee full access to essential health services;

(b) To improve the performance of the health system; and

(c) To intensify integrated action being taken against disease and disablement and for the promotion and protection of the nation's health.

124. The public health structures are organized in a pyramid which corresponds to the organization of the country's administrative system, as follows:

(a) Main hospitals: National Central Hospital, Neurological and Psychiatric Centre, Orthopaedics and Functional Rehabilitation Centre, National Hygiene Centre;

(b) At the moughataa level, there are 13 type A hospitals with more than 10 beds, a laboratory and a dental surgery department and 40 type B hospitals with 10 beds, including 4 maternity beds, and a small laboratory. All these hospitals are directed by qualified doctors;

(c) At the base of the pyramid, there are 225 health clinics (with special infectious diseases and maternity units) in the larger towns and 417 basic health clinics in localities of more than 500 inhabitants.

125. There are also some para-public structures, such as the Military Hospital and clinics operated by the National Industrial and Mining Company, as well as in-house dispensaries of the Department of Labour Medicine operated by the National Social Security Fund.

126. The expanding private sector already has 22 medical clinics, 33 surgeries, 14 dental surgeries, 15 health-care clinics and 285 pharmacies.

127. Most of these private facilities are concentrated in urban areas such as Nouakchott and Nouadhibou and are not readily accessible to most of the population for financial reasons.

128. Despite the progress achieved, in particular with regard to health coverage, access to health services, widespread provision of primary health care, the availability of essential medicines at reasonable cost and vaccination coverage (55-80 per cent in 1996), the situation continues to be a matter of concern in view of the prevailing infant mortality rate (118 per thousand), the child and adolescent mortality rate (182 per thousand) and the maternal mortality rate (940 per 100,000 live births).

129. The health situation continues to be affected by a combination of determining factors such as poverty, the lack of information for the people on health problems, the high illiteracy rate, rapid population growth and urbanization, inadequate drinking water supply and hygiene, the difficult social and economic situation of vulnerable groups such as women and young people and the inadequacy of the social insurance system.

B. Social affairs

130. The social sector is characterized by a large number of assistance and care facilities operated by the State as well as by local communities and various associations.

131. At the level of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, the main areas of action on the part of the social services are concerned with the protection of the family, the promotion of youth, the handicapped and street children and social security.

(a) Protection of the family

132. Pending the adoption of the family code that is currently in preparation, action is being taken to make the population aware of the potential risks of certain social practices such as early marriage and polygamy.

133. Single-parent families in which the head of the family is a woman and which are a major problem in Mauritania (over 37 per cent of households), have in some cases received support in the form of training and assistance in creating income-generating activities.

(b) Promotion of youth

134. The appeal for the promotion of youth launched by the President of the Republic on 20 August 1993 provided powerful impetus for the adoption of a national youth policy. At the outset, this policy focused on identifying the problems then beginning to face Mauritanian youth, such as dropping out of school, lack of qualifications, psychological pressures, family instability, smoking, use of psychotropic substances, absence of appropriate social and educational structures, early marriage and the prevalence of divorce among young women.

135. In this context, the national youth policy defines the following principles and guidelines for action: authenticity; unity; democracy; balance; interest in science and culture; and participation.

136. With regard to the establishment of social and educational facilities, there are youth centres in all main towns of the wilayas, as well as in other sizeable townships.

137. The Youth Department recently invited tenders for the construction of nine new youth centres and is currently working on extending the youth hostels experiment begun in 1986.

(c) Promotion of the disabled

138. A department dealing with the problems of disabled persons has been set up within the Social Affairs Directorate for the purpose of implementing the national policy in respect of this section of the population. The department's activities focus on four main areas, namely, specialized education, rehabilitation and training, the preparation of special laws and the social integration of the handicapped.

139. As a result of the programme of rehabilitation, readaptation and economic integration, 3,080 disabled persons have been re-educated and provided with equipment, 300 physically handicapped children have been placed in elementary schools and 58 deaf or blind children are receiving special education. Two hundred and eighteen handicapped adults are benefiting from a community-based reintegration project in four townships.

140. These figures, which may seem very low compared with results achieved in countries with a larger population than Mauritania, are significant when compared with available figures on the size of this sector of the population (approximately 40,000 people).

(d) Street children

141. This problem, which is a recent one in Mauritanian society, is still very limited because traditions of solidarity continue to exist and because certain services, such as education and health, are provided free of charge. Another reason, however, is that there are no declared cases of children born out of wedlock.

142. In order to prevent the growth of this phenomenon, the social affairs sector has established a programme of monitoring, assisting and protecting children in difficulties. The programme has five components: locating street children at night-time; providing them with shelter and lending them a sympathetic ear; placing delinquent minors in rehabilitation centres; placing children whose immediate reintegration in the family cannot be contemplated in open children's homes; and social and vocational integration with the support of the Vocational Training Centre.

143. This programme currently covers 800 children and adolescents and has enabled 23 per cent of them to return to their families, 30 per cent to be educated in open-system homes, 10 per cent to receive training in a trade and 37 per cent to be educated under supervision in a closed environment.

(e) Social security

144. The National Social Security Fund, established in 1967, plays an important role in the social welfare area by providing the following benefits: family allowances (25,000 beneficiaries for over 100,000 children); disability benefits in the event of an accident at work or an occupational disease (over 3,300 disability allowances); and old age and disability pensions and benefits paid in the event of death (over 6,000 new disability cases expected each year).

145. These welfare benefits are funded by compulsory contributions amounting to about 14 per cent of the wage, 13 per cent of which is payable by the employer and 1 per cent by the worker.

146. Affiliation to the social security system is compulsory for workers governed by the provisions of the Labour Code and the Merchant Navy Code. State employees not benefiting under a special social security scheme are also covered by the social security system. Tenured government officials have their contributions paid out of the State budget.

C. Housing

147. Mauritania is facing the challenge of urban population growth owing to the rapid sedentarization of nomads, which has accelerated the urbanization phenomenon. The urbanization rate rose from 3 per cent in 1960 to over 50 per cent in 1996.

148. Shanty towns have sprung up as a result of such massive sedentarization, especially in the capital, where the infrastructures for the reception of the nomads have proved inadequate. With a view to remedying this situation and providing basic social services, particularly housing, to this population group, the State has expanded its development strategies to include urbanization and the improvement of citizens' living conditions through the provision of low-rent housing.

149. The Real Estate Construction and Management Company (SOCOGIM) was established on 7 January 1974 to help solve the housing problem, which at the time was assuming proportions that defied all the public authorities' urbanization plans.

150. To date, SOCOGIM's real estate construction programmes have provided 2,400 dwellings and 3,166 rehabilitated housing plots in five towns (Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, Zouérate, Rosso and Kaédi). The company has recently started up a programme for the construction of 1,000 dwellings with the financial help of the Housing Bank established in 1996 to meet urgent needs for savings and real estate loans.

151. Despite their perceptible impact, which has helped to limit the scope of this problem, the real estate programmes have not yet succeeded in definitively solving the welfare housing problem. They have certainly helped to reduce the scope of the housing problem, but it continues to exist.

Article 6

152. Article 13 of the Constitution guarantees the preservation of citizens' rights in their dealings with justice. It reads: "All persons shall be presumed innocent until their guilt has been proven by a regularly constituted court. No one may be prosecuted, arrested or punished except in cases determined by law and in accordance with the forms prescribed by law. The honour and private life of citizens, the inviolability of the home and of citizens' correspondence are guaranteed by the State".

153. The Constitution guarantees the right of asylum, thus perpetuating the Mauritanian people's tradition of hospitality. It also guarantees the fundamental rights of aliens residing in Mauritania, as follows: "Any alien legally resident in the national territory shall enjoy the protection of the law for his person and property" (art. 21).

154. Article 22 of the Constitution provides that "No one may be extradited except by virtue of the laws and conventions governing extradition".

155. The right of defence and the right to a fair trial are guaranteed to all citizens and residents by virtue of article 6 of the Reorganization of the Judiciary Act of 21 January 1993, which provides that: "No one may be tried in either a civil or a criminal case without being notified of his right of defence. Defence and the choice of defence counsel are free. No one shall be brought before any but their natural judges. Consequently, only courts established by law may hand down sentences".

156. Act No. 95 024 of 19 July 1995 repealing and replacing Order No. 86 112 of 12 July 1986 establishing the National Bar Association provides in its article 3: "Only lawyers shall be entitled to represent, assist and defend the parties or to plead in all matters of law".

157. Article 3, paragraph 2, gives lawyers the right to lodge appeals and to undertake any action in the interests of their clients according to the terms of the authorization contract, to request the raising of distraints, and to issue any documents necessary for the enforcement of judgements and decisions.

158. Article 3 (last paragraph) further guarantees that lawyers have the right to exercise their activities in all courts and in judicial and disciplinary bodies of public administrations and professional associations, except where there are legal provisions expressly to the contrary.

159. The length of time for which a person may be held in police custody is set at 48 hours by Act No. 93 10; it may not exceed 72 hours in any case except the following:

(a) Production, trafficking in or use of drugs and psychotropic substances, for which the period of police custody is set by article 24 of Act No. 93 037 of 20 July 1993 at 72 hours, renewable twice;

(b) In the event of a crime or offence against the security of the State or the external security of the State, when the period of police custody may be increased to 30 days;

(c) Where police custody takes place in a place far removed from the seat of the competent court, the period of custody is extended by 24 hours for every 50 kilometres.

160. The Code of Criminal Procedure provides for the release on bail of arrested persons who request such release and who meet the conditions established by law. Release on bail may be ordered automatically by the investigating judge with the approval of the Procurator of the Republic.

161. In order to guarantee the rights of persons involved in both civil and criminal cases, the judiciary is composed of the court of first instance, the Appeals Court and the Supreme Court, each having its own jurisdiction.

162. Besides administrative and judicial procedures of appeal to higher courts, citizens may bring claims before the independent institution of the Mediator of the Republic. However, the Mediator of the Republic cannot intervene in a case which is already sub judice or challenge the correctness of a court decision, but may only make recommendations to the body against which the claim is brought. In the event of the non-execution of a judicial decision adopted by virtue of res judicata, the Mediator of the Republic may enjoin the body in question to comply with that decision within a period of time determined by him.

163. The only drawback of this institution, which was set up in order to provide citizens with an additional remedy is that the procedure of referral to a court can be instituted indirectly only through a member of Parliament or a mayor. Despite this limitation, the Mediator of the Republic has helped to settle dozens of disputes between citizens and various administrations, territorial units, public establishments and other public service bodies.

164. A sustained effort to review and adapt our laws with a view to bringing them into line with the new constitutional environment has been in progress since 1991. The aim is to fill the gaps from which the judiciary suffered, particularly during the emergency rule period, and to adapt certain laws to the new national realities and international undertakings. Thus, the Department of Justice is currently embarking on the drafting of a Family Code, a Code of Obligations and Contracts and a Code of Civil, Commercial and Administrative Procedure.

Article 7

165. With regard to the provisions of the Convention relating to measures in the fields of teaching, education, culture and information with a view to combating prejudices which lead to racial discrimination and to promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations and racial or ethnical groups, as well as to propagating the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention, Mauritanian authorities have taken many measures to make education and schooling generally available, promote the national culture, guarantee the right to information for all citizens and cultivate the ideals of tolerance, friendship, fraternity and respect for human rights.

(a) Education

166. In view of the importance of education in the promotion of social and economic development, Mauritania has adopted an ambitious policy aimed at providing education for all and at eradicating illiteracy. The budget allocated to education accounts for 25 per cent of the State's public expenditures.

167. In 1997, there were 311,581 students in elementary education as against 166,036 in 1991.

168. Unfortunately, gender distribution continues to show some disparities in favour of males. In 1991, 52.6 per cent of the country's boys as against 40.7 per cent of girls were attending primary school, the national average being 46.8 per cent. However, this difference of 12 percentage points in 1991 fell to 8 percentage points in 1997 thanks to the more dynamic development of this indicator, which rose to 81.2 per cent of girls and 89.4 per cent of boys for a national average of 85.3 per cent.

169. The disparity between boys and girls in terms of elementary schooling is repeated at the secondary school level (65 per cent boys as against 35 per cent girls) and in higher education (85 per cent boys as against 15 per cent girls).

170. The proportion of women teachers in 1995-1996 was 19 per cent. Notwithstanding the qualitative and quantitative advances achieved in the past few years, as a result of which the school enrolment rate rose from 71.32 per cent in 1994 to 87.1 per cent in 1996, the goal continues to be the achievement of universal schooling by the year 2000.

171. The Government's educational policy is aimed at setting up a system of education which strengthens cultural roots, ensures social emancipation and facilitates the training of skilled manpower and the development of high-level national expertise.

172. School curricula include subjects related to human rights, such as civics and moral and religious instruction, which is a compulsory subject that promotes the ideals of tolerance, friendship, fairness and justice, the strengthening of national unity and respect for human rights. The teaching

of this subject also cultivates citizenship with a view to ensuring rapprochement, harmony and cohesion among the components of the Mauritanian people and between the Mauritanian people and other communities and nations.

173. At the level of higher education, university curricula include lectures on human rights and public freedoms. In 1993 and 1994, the University of Nouakchott organized a symposium on political multipartism and an international symposium on "Justice and Democracy". From 10 to 13 April 1995, it also organized the first Meeting on the Teaching of Human Rights, as well as symposia on topics directly related to the advancement of women, the rights of the child, international humanitarian law, etc.

(b) National languages

174. In terms of languages, Mauritania is composed of an Arabic-speaking majority and of non-Arabic-speaking Pulars, Soninkés and Wolof.

175. So far as the cultural structure is concerned, the Mauritanian people has drawn on Arabic, Islamic and African sources, synthesizing them to create its own specific character and forge its national identity.

176. Article 6 of the Constitution states: "The national languages are Arabic, Pular, Soninké and Wolof; the official language is Arabic." Thus, the teaching of the Pular, Soninké and Wolof languages has been introduced into the educational system in addition to Arabic, which is the language of Islamic culture and a tradition common to all components of the Mauritanian people, and side by side with French, which is the language of education and administration.

177. During the 1996/97 school year, 1,678 students, including 927 boys and 751 girls, were able to pursue their primary schooling in 47 experimental classes spread over five wilayas with Pular, Soninké or Wolof as the first language.

178. Experimental classes are supervised by the Ministry of National Education through the National Languages Institute, which was set up by Presidential Decree No. 79-348/PG/MFES of 10 December 1979 and whose mandate is "to organize, coordinate and promote applied research in the field of all the national languages".

179. The national languages are also represented in radio and television, where daily broadcasting times are set aside for programmes broadcast in those languages. The rural radio broadcasts more than 66 per cent of its programmes in the Pular, Saninké and Wolof languages.

180. Three cultural associations for the promotion of the national languages covering speakers of Pular, Soninké and Wolof have been officially recognized by the public authorities.

(c) Culture

181. The Culture Department organizes three book fairs each year, as well as a painting exhibition, and holds several symposia and festivals designed to

make known the various facets of the national culture and to ensure the cultural development of all components of the Mauritanian people.

182. The cultural scene is further enlivened by cultural events organized by the Mauritanian Writers' Association, theatre shows and concerts of Arab and African music given by singers from Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, etc.

183. At Sélibaby in March 1998, Mauritania hosted the latest African Fraternity Arts Week (SAFRA), which is organized every year in a border town of one of the countries of the subregion (Mali, Guinea, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Mauritania and Cape Verde, which participated this year as an observer).

184. This year's SAFRA activities included theatre, ballet, choral music and traditional folklore performances, as well as arts and crafts exhibits, sports events (football, traditional wrestling) and social and educational activities (lectures and individual contributions).

185. From 4 November to 31 December 1996, Mauritania hosted an exhibition of works of art from countries bordering on the River Niger. The following six countries of the subregion participated in this event: Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Guinea.

186. All these cultural forums attended by writers, artists and singers belonging to the country's various social and cultural communities are additional areas of freedom of expression designed to ensure cultural development, strengthen national unity and promote understanding and friendship at the national and regional levels.

(d) The media

187. The information and communication media were under State control from independence until the establishment of multi-party democracy in 1991, which led to the rapid development of a free written press.

188. Outside the electoral period, when they are open free of charge and on a basis of equality to all candidates and parties, State radio and television are the essential instruments for information and education of the population on development problems, promoting the national culture, instilling the values of work, literacy and equality and combating prejudice and backwardness.

(i) Radio Mauritania

189. This radio station is mandated "to inform, educate and entertain the Mauritanian public, help promote positive attitudes and contribute to the strengthening of multi-party democracy and extending the country's cultural influence".

190. Radio Mauritania broadcasts for 20 hours a day, during which it presents short subjects, round tables, interviews and reports on many areas of interest (health, education, culture, current affairs, etc.). These programmes are rebroadcast on FM by regional stations throughout the country.

(ii) Rural radio

191. This station, which was set up in 1984, broadcasts for 35 hours a week and adopts a participatory approach by broadcasting programmes which involve the various population groups, thus establishing a fruitful dialogue with them. The schedule includes several educational programmes.

(iii) Mauritanian Television

192. This television channel, created in 1984, devotes 20 per cent of its 35 weekly broadcasting hours to education, health, agriculture, the advancement of women, action to combat illiteracy, sports and socio-educational activities.

(iv) The written press

193. In addition to a national daily appearing in two language versions ("Chaab" in Arabic and "Horizons" in French) and published by the Mauritanian Information Agency, the press has, since the proclamation of freedom of expression and of the press by the Constitution of 20 July 1991, been enriched by 200 independent new titles, including 20 daily newspapers which appear regularly.

CONCLUSION

194. Mauritania's geographical position as a link between the Arab Maghreb and Sahelian Africa and its historical heritage as a country of cultural exchanges and traditions have made it a multi-ethnic and multicultural nation.

195. Integration and harmony among the country's various socio-cultural communities have never suffered from racial discrimination. All communities are united, not only by extensive cross-marriage, but also by unifying religious links arising from the fact that they all belong to the Muslim religion, which prohibits racial discrimination and advocates equality.

196. Sometimes, however, the social relationships inherent in conventional tribal traditions and in the traditional stratification of society according to the principal activities of its categories composing it have given rise to anachronistic manifestations.

197. It goes without saying that this situation derives essentially from economic considerations or from the historical legacy of the struggle for survival in a hostile natural environment rather than from the reasoned choice of a social project which has never given rise to any form of racial discrimination or exploitation.

198. This situation has deteriorated under the combined effects of changes in attitudes, changes in ways of life and the public authorities' commitment to ensuring the rule of law and democracy and creating the conditions necessary for harmonious economic and social development.

199. The democratization of public life, universal schooling, agrarian reform, action to combat illiteracy, the opening up of country areas by new

roads, access to drinking water, the expansion of the country's health-care coverage and the extension of the telecommunications network are, together and separately, the factors which have hastened the eradication of social flaws and consolidated the country's march towards economic and social progress.

200. The establishment this year, the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, Poverty Alleviation and Integration is another step towards that objective. The Office's mandate reflects the importance being attached to human rights and the interdependence between them.

201. Mauritania reiterates its commitment to take all necessary steps with a view to the full implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, whose principles and ideals are wholly in conformity with the teachings of Islam.

202. It will continue to combat ignorance, poverty and exclusion, which are the real obstacles to the disappearance of all forms of prejudice and to the promotion of human rights.

203. In this struggle, Mauritania, which relies primarily on the maturity of its people and on its own forces and resources, knows that it is not alone. This is the struggle of all those who, at the world level, are working to achieve the ideals of equality, dignity, justice and solidarity.